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# A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY

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An understanding of the social significance of Christianity, in the sense of the religion of Jesus—an insight into its place and meaning in social evolution—is perhaps the one thing most needed in an intellectual way by the world at the present time. No historical movement has been more misunderstood, alike by friend and foe, than Christianity. This is largely because of the lack of sociological and anthropological perspective and knowledge. Only the densest sociological ignorance would suppose that the Christian movement is an accident in human history. On the contrary, like its political counterpart (the movement toward democracy), it is of the very essence of later social and cultural evolution. To understand what it means we must glance briefly at the movement of human history as a whole, as it is pictured to us by modern science.

Anthropologists tell us that the whole history of man may be roughly divided into three stages—savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Savagery, in which man is a mere child of nature, living off of the wild fruits of the earth and the animals that he can kill and eat, making no attempt to control his own destiny, lasted for the race at least one hundred thousand years, archaeological evidence shows, while some belated groups still survive in it. Barbarism, a transitional stage, in which man begins to cultivate the soil and raise

domestic animals but soon turns his attention to preying upon his fellow-men as an easier method of gaining a livelihood than the mastering of nature, began in Europe about seven or eight thousand years ago with the coming of neolithic man. Militancy and predatoriness were the chief social traits of barbarism, and these in turn grew out of a narrow "group morality" and a limited consciousness of kind. Civilization only began with the keeping of historic records, with man's coming to social self-consciousness, and with his beginning of the control and conquest of the mental or spiritual element in his life. This stage of human history is, then, a thing of yesterday—only in its beginnings, not more than four or five thousand years old for any people, and scarcely two thousand years old for most Europeans. We began to outgrow barbarism, in other words, but yesterday, and it should not be surprising that most of us in some respects are barbarians still.

To the sociological imagination this development of human culture presents itself as a parabola, with human experience as the chief element at its focus. The lower part of the curve may be taken as representing the thousands of years of savagery, of brute-like ignorance and subjection to the blind forces of nature, through which the race has passed. The upper part of the curve may be taken as the thousands of

years of civilization, of mastery over physical nature and human nature, which, we may hope, lies ahead of our race. The remaining or vertical part of the curve will then represent that transitional stage of barbarism through which our race has passed on its way from animality to spirituality, from ignorance to knowledge, from the darkness of savagery to the light of civilization.

Evidently we are now just entering upon the upper part of the curve, with the real work and higher achievements of civilization still lying all ahead of us. The typical institutions of barbarism, or predatory culture, still survive, or but lately existed among us. Yesterday we had slavery, and even today we are only trying to rid ourselves of polygamy, autocracy, militarism, class exploitation, and the debaucheries of barbarous self-indulgence. We are evidently still slowly and painfully learning the rudiments of true civilization.

Let us recall the method of cultural evolution and the importance of "pattern ideas," or "ideals" in the social life in furthering social progress. The transition from lower to higher stages of civilization, anthropologists tell us, is intermediated by the formation of pattern ideas, or "ideals." By the principle of anticipation these ideas are often formed far in advance of the complete birth of the new civilization. The human mind sees the need or the advantage, sets up an "ideal," a "pattern" of the thing to be realized, and then by various methods works toward its goal. Thus long before men invented the flying machine they formed the idea of the flying machine.

Then they watched the flight of birds and other animals and studied the properties of physical nature until they found methods of realizing their ideal of the flying machine. Thousands of such illustrations might be given. All of the important things in human culture, then, exist first as "pattern ideas" in the minds of men before they are realized in actual life; and they exist, as a rule, long before they are realized.

Now this principle applies to the great changes in religion and morals, and so in civilization itself, not less than in the realm of mechanical invention. Such changes come through the starting of new pattern ideas or standards in the mind of man. These are reflected upon by the popular mind, and if accepted and approved they become the "mores," the all-powerful standards, of a new culture. But the pattern ideas or standards of a new culture do not arise gradually out of those of the old culture or in general mix harmoniously with them. Rather, cultural evolution proceeds by one type entirely supplanting another type. Thus the standards of the predatory type of culture known as barbarism must be supplanted by entirely different standards before we can have true civilization. Nevertheless, the ideals and standards of an older type of culture may persist for an indefinite time alongside of a new, while the new type is emerging. Thus arises a conflict between the old and the new; and this explains in large measure the great moral conflicts in our present world. As the ideas and standards of predatory culture have been thousands of years dominant in

our tradition, we must expect that they will manifest themselves at times in their old power, in the earlier stages of the non-predatory culture upon which, we may hope, the world is now entering.

What Christianity is from an anthropological and sociological point of view must now be manifest. Christianity is a new set of "pattern ideas," marking the dawn of a new civilization, a civilization with non-predatory morality on a humanitarian basis. *It is an effort to transcend predatory individual, class, tribal, and national ethics and to replace these with a universalized, social, international, humanitarian ethics.* The beginnings of this movement are to be found, of course, in the many precursors of Jesus. But in the life and teachings of Jesus these ideas first came to definite expression. He initiated the revolution in religious and moral ideas for which the whole of human history had been preparing.

Only misunderstanding of human history and of the nature of religion could lead anyone to see in Christianity merely a stage in the evolution of man's theological beliefs. All religion is an instrument of social adaptation. The adaptation of human society to a universal, non-predatory type of culture necessarily required a new religion of an international, humanitarian character, to broaden man's consciousness of kind. Christianity apparently started about two millennia ago as a protest against Jewish formalism and particularism. But as such a protest, it had to develop the spiritual and universal side of Judaism, which was already

more or less explicit in the teachings of its later prophets. In Jesus we find the supreme development of this prophetic Judaism with its trend toward ethical and religious universalism. His clear teaching was that the only possible way to serve God was through the service of men, no matter what their condition, occupation, or nationality might be. Thus he revolutionized both religion and ethics in humanizing both. The humanitarian impulse of the time, accordingly, attached itself to Christianity, which became an idealistic social movement in the Graeco-Roman world<sup>1</sup> to supplant its predatory traditions by new ideals of peace, good will, mutual aid, and brotherhood among men.

But why did such a movement originate in Judea? Why did it spring up within the confines of Judaism? Doubtless something must be attributed to the fact that in Judea the cultures of the Occident and the Orient met, and that there was the point where new cultural ideals, or "patterns," embodying the best in both, could be most easily developed. The sociological principle of the "cross-fertilization of cultures" comes in here. Social developments in the Graeco-Roman world, especially stoicism and increasing cosmopolitan practices, had done much to prepare the way for humanitarian ideas and ideals in religion and ethics. At the same time similar movements were starting in the Orient. That these should have come to a focus in Judea is what we should scientifically expect when we clearly understand the nature of Judaism.

<sup>1</sup> See especially an article by Professor Votaw on "Primitive Christianity an Idealistic Social Movement" in the *American Journal of Theology* for January, 1918.

For the deeper reason for the development of Christianity in Judea was the nature of ancient Judaism. Unlike many ancient religions it had not wandered off, so to speak, into religious by-paths, but had kept close to the main line of religious evolution as the development and spiritualization of social ideals and values. Psychologically Judaism was an idealization and projection of the values connected with the family life. All the religious and ethical concepts of Judaism were based upon the family.<sup>1</sup> All of the phraseology of the later prophets especially was borrowed from the domestic and social life. In other words, the ancient Jews had kept a relatively unspoiled family life as the center of their social life, and from the fraternity and idealism of this "primary group" had derived their religious and ethical concepts and ideals. Now sociology shows that the primary source of social idealism is in the social experiences in the "primary groups," especially in the family and the neighborhood. All human history is in one sense a struggle to take the fraternity and democracy realized in these groups, when at their best, and make them humanity-wide. Thus Judaism in its development represented the main trend of religious and social evolution; and it only needed to break the shell of nationalistic particularism, as we have said, to become a universal and humanitarian religion.

It was the work of Jesus to broaden thus the religious tradition and to point it to its final goal. Whatever view one may take of his personality, all must

admit that the Christian movement received its initial form and impulse from him. It was his creative personality which finally focused all the idealistic trends in the religious and moral life of the time and brought them to the white heat of a new religion. This again accords with scientific sociological principles; for sociology has shown that the creative influence of personality is necessary in all human achievement, and that all human progress is achievement. Masterful personal leadership is a necessary element, therefore, in every great social movement toward a higher plane of civilization; and the personality of Jesus furnished and has continued to furnish such leadership for the religious and moral revolution which Christianity seeks to effect. Jesus was not an accident in human history, nor is the recognition of his continued leadership of the Christian movement an accident.

We must not look at early Christianity, however, as anything more than a beginning. It has been wrongly regarded by most Christians as marking the completion and perfection of religion and morality.<sup>2</sup> But Christianity can be this only when the Christian movement has achieved its final development and has succeeded in establishing a humanitarian civilization, a Christian state of society. Christianity is not a static thing. To regard Jesus himself as standing other than at the beginning of a great new movement in human culture is to misunderstand him culturally and historically. Even the words of Jesus, though they be together

<sup>1</sup> See MacCurdy, *History, Prophecy, and the Monuments*, Vol. II, chap. ii.

<sup>2</sup> See Case, *The Evolution of Early Christianity*, chap. i.

with his life the touchstone of the Christian spirit, mark only the beginning of the unfolding of a new conception of human relationships, a social life, non-predatory in character and patterned upon the ideals of good will, mutual service, and brotherhood among men.

Christianity started, then, as a religion of love and of human service, and its permanent successes have largely come through its having this character. Even though the world was not ready to receive and to carry out its principles and though its followers soon distorted them beyond description, yet impartiality must lead us to acknowledge that it started as an idealistic social movement in the Graeco-Roman world, marking the dawn of a religion of humanity. Moreover, it is only fair to add that through all the centuries the best representatives of Christianity have always held to the idealistic social point of view. The place of Christianity in the evolution of religion and its social significance accordingly is clear. We have said that it is an endeavor to transcend tribal and national religion and ethics by a religion of the love and service of humanity as a whole. In other words, *it is an endeavor to establish a world-wide, ideal, human society, in which justice and good will shall be realized, upon a religious basis.* Its aim, as has been well said, is nothing less than the creation of "a new world."

But if this is the social meaning and aim of Christianity, why, it may be asked, has historical Christianity accomplished so little during all the centuries to establish justice and good will among men? The answer to such a question, if it were to attempt completeness,

would have to review, not only the whole history of the Christian church, but the whole history of the world since the introduction of Christianity. The chief obstacles to the achievement of a Christian state of human society, however, may perhaps be summarized under three heads: The first is the fact that Christianity has been in the main taken by professed Christians as a theological and metaphysical doctrine rather than as a practical, ethical, and social attitude. The world into which Christianity was introduced was dominantly theologically minded, and it has remained in that state until very recent times. The second obstacle which Christianity as a social and ethical system encountered was the pagan religions and morals of the ancient world, which, we have tried to show, have very definitely survived even in the traditions of our present civilization. From the first, the pagan state of religion and morals forced Christianity in practical life to compromise; and pagan habits of thought made it almost impossible for all except a few minds to comprehend the meaning of the social teachings of Christianity. The third obstacle to the social success of Christianity has been the failure of its representatives to appreciate the importance of material and economic factors in the life of man.

Man is not only a spiritual being with spiritual, that is, social and ethical wants; but he is also a material being hemmed about by the forces of the material world. His spiritual life can only blossom and come to fruition under favorable material and economic conditions. If it is true, as Jesus said,

that "man does not live by bread alone," it is also true that man cannot live without bread. The material wants of life must be satisfied, in other words, in some proper measure before the spiritual life can have a fair chance to develop. The social ideals of religion, if they are to be practical, cannot concern themselves exclusively with the immaterial things of life. The cry of the masses for bread must not be met by presenting them a stone in the form of ethical truth regarding the value of a mind above the things of this world. Nor did Jesus so teach or so act, one cannot but remark. When religion develops this sort of otherworldliness, it is bound to become a stumbling-block to human progress, and to be accused of being merely a means to quiet the justifiable discontent of the suffering masses. Now the social failure of historical Christianity in the past has been largely due to the non-recognition of this truth; and this is the main reason why some men have lost their faith in the social power of religion.

A social and humanitarian religion cannot regard anything in human life as alien to itself. In a sense it is concerned as much with the material conditions of life as with the spiritual, because it does not conceive that social redemption is possible without control, for the sake of the higher social values, over *all* of the conditions of life. In other words, it is quite as much the aim of social religion to transform the environment in which the individual must live as to bring to the individual soul redemptive truth and spiritually uplifting influences; and it is the

material, quite as much as it is the spiritual, environment, which must be transformed if social religion is to succeed in its great work of creating an ideal human society in which justice and good will shall be realized.

Not only must the failures of historical Christianity be fully recognized, but we must also recognize the frequent failure hitherto of all humanitarian religion for the reasons just mentioned. The social failure of humanitarian religion, however, is like the social failure of science: it has been a failure at times to envisage the whole of the social reality and the whole of human life. In our rapidly changing and increasingly complex social world such failure is to be expected. Only a religious or scientific dogma which fails to see that religion is a growing, evolving thing, still to be perfected, would throw aside religion because it has failed in the past and is still very far from meeting the full needs of our social life. All of our institutions are failures in this sense. Yet one who would discard the family or the government, for example, because they have failed in the past and still fall short of meeting the requirements of our present civilization, would be foolish. The most conspicuous failure of all, the candid scientific mind will readily admit, is science itself. For modern science until very recently has conspicuously failed to envisage human life as a complex whole, and even in many instances, indeed, to take cognizance of social reality at all. Yet the scientific mind does not lose faith in science because of the failures of science. On the contrary, because of its method and its aim the very failures of science

are an incentive to the further development of science.

In the same way the failures of religion always attest to its supreme worth and in all rational minds are an incentive to its further development. No human institution has grown in any other way than through successes and failures; and one must admit that the failures of institutions have more often contributed to their rational development than their successes. The hopeful thing in this world of ours is that human life and civilization are ever turning defeat into victory. It is time that those who see the social value of religion—who see that religion is not less needed than science to meet the problems of our complex human living together—should rally and turn into victory whatever defeats religion has sustained. The development of humanitarian religion is only just beginning; but it must be developed on a world-wide scale if humanitarian civilization is to go forward with its work.

Moral renewal is now obviously the one thing most needed in Western civilization. Only the rebirth of vital, humanitarian religion can save Western civilization from defeat. This surely means that the world has need of continuing to acknowledge the spiritual supremacy and leadership of Jesus; and this means that we need a rebirth of vital Christianity, in the sense of the religion of Jesus. What is needed is that the leaders of the religious life of our day grasp the full social significance of religion, drop their theological disputations, give religion the positive humanitarian trend which the social situation demands, and teach clearly, as Jesus did, that the only possible service of God must consist in the service of men, no matter what their class, race, or condition may be. If this were done, and if such a religion of human service became generally accepted, it is safe to say that all of the irrational, unsocial, and unprogressive elements in our civilization would disappear.